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SUBJECT: Leader of the Hue Branch of the Outlawed United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (CONGEN MEETS HUE BUDDHISTS DESPITE GVN INTERFERENCE

REPREF: 01 HANOI 1340, HANOI 2255, A) HCMC 0412, B) HCMC 0585

Summary

1. (SBU) An influential leader of the Hue branch of the outlawed UBCV discussed his views with DPO and A/PAO on the current state of the Buddhist Church, the status of Thich Huyen Quang, and the need for continued U.S. pressure on the GVN to allow greater religious freedom. The meeting was marred briefly by GVN attempts to first block the call on the monks at their pagoda, then surveil the visit.

All Buddhists Are One, but U.S. Assistance Helps

2. (SBU) Summary: On June 17, 2003 Deputy Principal Officer, U.S. Consulate General of Ho Chi Minh City, met with DPO and A/PAO called on Thich Thien Hanh, leader of the Hue Branch of the outlawed United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), and his assistant Thich Phu Viet at the Bao Quoc Pagoda in Hue last month. During their two-hour meeting, the religious leader reiterated his organization's now standard "line" that to discuss the UBCV's current status in Vietnam, as well as the health and well being of Thich Huyen Quang, leader of the UBCV currently under house arrest. End Summary. Most monks in Vietnam actually belong to the UBCV. In his view, the UBCV and the officially recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) were divided artificially but were still one. He also said more than 60 percent of the population in Hue followed the UBCV, as opposed to roughly 40-50 percent of the population nationwide. This high concentration of UBCV followers in Hue had always given the local monks great influence within the organization. His own Bao Quoc Pagoda had 26 monks, while the largest in the area had 80. He also referred to 500 pagodas in Thua Thien-Hue province and 200 in the city of Hue alone, although it was unclear whether or not these were all UBCV. The last new pagoda was built in 1981, the same year the UBCV was outlawed.

3. (SBU) Thich Thien Hanh said he had seen conflicting signs of change in the GVN's attitude towards religious freedom. There were no restrictions on individuals practicing their religion or discussions within the UBCV pagodas. There were currently no UBCV monks or believers in the Hue area facing detention and no domestic travel restrictions. He noted, however, that international travel remained difficult, citing a member of the UBCV who was denied permission to travel to China in 2001 as the most recent specific case. There were also restrictions on building new pagodas. His main concern remains legalizing the status of the UBCV.

4. (SBU) According to Thich Thien Hanh, the GVN was worried that a "legalized" UBCV might develop into a political party challenging the authority of the Communist Party (CPV). Asked directly about the possibility of working within the current legal framework of the GVN, Thich Thien Hanh felt it would be difficult, but might be possible. His assistant seemed even more skeptical. Even so, Thich Thien Hanh called on the USG to aid in the UBCV's quest for legal recognition within Vietnam. He repeated this several times and stated explicitly that it was his only request, although he also hoped the U.S., as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, would continue working to persuade the GVN to respect human rights in accordance with its UN obligations.

Thich Huyen Quang

5. (SBU) Based on reports from a Hue monk who had just returned from Quy Nhon, UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang (ref A) was in good health. Monks were allowed to visit him freely and speak with him privately and UBCV and VBS had gone jointly to see him. While he remained unrestricted in his ability to travel, he was required to have a GVN escort at all times. Thich Thien Hanh briefly recounted the Patriarch's visit to Hue in April 2003, noting that 3,000 to 4,000 people had turned out to greet him upon his arrival.

As the visit had been approved by the GVN in advance, there had been no negative reaction from the local authorities.

External Relations Still Sensitive

16. (SBU) Shortly before the meeting was scheduled to begin, an FSN from the HCMC Public Affairs staff was called in to speak with the Director of the Hue Office of External Relations (ERO), Mr. Chau Binh Nguyen. Mr. Nguyen advised PAS FSN that he was aware of a meeting "at a pagoda" and that ConGen officers should not hold the meeting because it had not sent a diplomatic note requesting permission. DPO explained that the agreement between the USG and GVN -- the same agreement that theoretically binds their officers in San Francisco to notify us of their travel outside of that city -- required prior notification (not permission) for official meetings with government officials. After checking with Thich Thien Hanh -- who seemed genuinely surprised that the ERO knew we were coming but clearly wanted the meeting to proceed regardless -- DPO decided to hold the meeting as planned.

17. (SBU) ConGen drivers indicated there were police present when the DPO and APAO arrived at the pagoda, although they were not clearly visible and made no attempt to stop the meeting. When ConGen officers left, however, they observed a handful of individuals who appeared to be plainclothes police within the compound, and several police cars with uniformed police standing just outside the gate. ConGenoffs did not observe any police following them from the pagoda. In a follow-up call the next day, the monks at the pagoda reported no problems after the meeting. Mr. Nguyen continued to express his concern that the meeting had taken place without a dip note which he could share with the local Committee on Religious Affairs.

Comment

18. (SBU) Despite the free and open exchange with Thich Thien Hanh, including his own generally positive pronouncements on the continuing ability of the UBCV to practice their religion and attract followers, the actions of the provincial leadership illustrate the ongoing official paranoia over unrecognized religious groups. There is also a more general pattern of provincial authorities seeking to "approve" all ConGen meetings in their localities. The Hue ERO's argument that we needed a diplomatic note due to Thich Thien Hanh's status as a religious leader was disingenuous at best, given that the Vietnamese government does not recognize the UBCV as a religion. On the bright side, even though Mr. Nguyen remained adamant about the need for a dip note, he stressed that the ConGen could hold its meeting without a GVN presence.

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